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ABSTRACT

The concept of merit compensation is clarified from both administrative and faculty perspectives, and the conceptual sources of the controversy surrounding "merit" are addressed. Using the lexical tradition of the verb "to merit," four distinct semantic components are identified: to earn, to deserve, to value or give preference, and to obtain one's share. A Venn diagram is used to illustrate the full semantic domain of this verb. Up to 1960, the dominant ethos that motivated and guided academic administration was that of the guild of scholars. Given the current business ethos of college administrations, the verb "to merit" is construed to mean either "to earn," or "to deserve," or "to value or give preference." Therefore, merit compensation may be construed to be whatever a faculty salary schedule reads, perquisites of status, or a prize for performance, analogous to the bonus in business. However, faculty, who have not given up their guild orientation, construe "to merit" to mean "to earn deservedly that which is valued." Merit compensation is understood by faculty to be a deserved earning reflecting esteem. It is recommended that campuses develop a common axiological language and shared hierarchy of values. (SW)

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by

James Steve Counelis

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MERIT COMPENSATION AND HIGHER EDUCATION

by

James Steve Counelis*

Introduction:

Merit compensation or "merit pay" is a controversial concept in higher education. And though the concept of merit compensation has a "just" and "fair" and "appropriate" ring about it, the content of the concept is not a very clear one. Indeed at this time, the controversy over its meaning is fundamentally financial, valuational and power-ladened.

The purpose of this brief presentation is to determine and analyze of the semantic domain of the verb "to merit" and relate this result to the ethos of American higher education administrations and their faculties. Through this process, the concept of merit compensation will be clarified from both administrative and faculty perspectives; and the conceptual sources of the controversy surrounding "merit" will be brought to the fore.

Salary Structure and First Principles:

Some twenty years ago, this writer had published a very brief piece, titled, "Junior College Salary Structure Depends on Working Assumptions." [1] This piece was published as a guest editorial in the October 1964 issue of College and University Business. The occasion for this piece was the movement of the

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Chicago City Junior College away from its secondary school institutional framework through the adoption of the professorial rank system---a national movement among junior/community college faculties at the time. Of course, the salary schedule was a vital issue at the moment. The burden of this brief piece was to delineate the then understood higher education ethos in the United States and its relationship to junior college salary structures. These understandings were:

(1) The college and university faculty is composed of academic persons who either teach and/or do research and/or administer the academic enterprise.

(2) All college and university faculty personnel are employed on the bases of their professional education, their scholarly competence, and their personal virtues.

(3) All college and university faculty personnel---professors and academic administrators---ought to be attached to some academic department, ought to possess professorial rank, and be paid a salary commensurate with criteria established for the professorial rank held.

(4) All college and university faculty personnel are evaluated, periodically, for promotion to higher professorial ranks and for increments in salary.

(5) All college and university faculty personnel---professors and academic administrators---acting as a consonant guild, have the individual and collective responsibility to govern themselves, the moral duty to police themselves, and to render competent and fair judgment of their peers when evaluating them for purposes of promotions in professorial rank.

(6) All college and university faculty personnel---professors and administrators---ought to be merited equally.

(7) The difference between academic administration and the teaching/research function is one of kind and not one of degree or merit.

(8) Administrative responsibility for an academic enterprise does not vary with the size and complexity of that enterprise. This is true because administrative responsibility is unitary rather than incremental, decremental or divisive in nature. Hence, the size and complexity of an institution is not an appropriate measure for salary schedule construction. Indeed,

institutional size is, more properly, an objective index for the measurement of need for professional services required to carry on the academic enterprise.

(9) All college and university faculty personnel---professors and administrators---ought to be rated for excellence on the basis of continuing evidence in professional competence, professional growth, and professional conduct.

Though the Chicago City Junior College had branch chapters of the AAUP and a faculty union, these institutions were still weak. Additionally, the values of the college's administrators and faculty were fairly homogenous, centering around these nine understandings or assumptions. However, the ethos of today's college and university administrators and their faculties has vastly changed over the last twenty or so years. Perhaps the notion of "merit" has changed with it, though certainly standards have changed.

The Semantic Domain of the Verb "to merit":

The notion of a "domain" is a metaphor arising from set theory. The semantic domain of any given concept qua term consists of a pattern of semantic components, each component formed by the common extensional meaning attached to the term qua concept. [2]

Using the lexical tradition of the verb "to merit," four distinct semantic components comprise the semantic domain of this verb: (1) to earn {A}; (2) to deserve {B}; (3) to value or to give preference, e.g., honor, excellence, proficiency, appropriateness, virtue {C}; (4) to obtain one's share {D}. However, the definitions and the examples of usage given in the Oxford English Dictionary for the verb "to merit" and its other forms demonstrate

the intersecting character of these semantic components. [3] Therefore the semantic components are not purely univocal. The following Venn diagram is used here to illustrate the full semantic domain of the verb "to merit."

[Insert chart here.]

Four boxes in an intersecting pattern are found in the Venn diagram. Each box represents one of the four semantic components of the verb "to merit" delineated above. The overlapping pattern is derived from the definitional usages and exemplars of the specific semantic component as given in Oxford English Dictionary. The following is a full listing of all the "meanings" that the verb "to merit" denotes:

(1) A: to earn;

(2) B: to deserve;

(3) C: to value or to give preference;

(4) D: to obtain one's share;

(5) A ∩ B: to earn and to deserve that earning;

(6) B ∩ C: to deserve and to value those deserts;

(7) A ∩ D: to obtain one's earned share;

(8) A ∩ B ∩ C: to earn and deserve that earning which is esteemed.

The verb "to merit" is freighted with this wide array of meanings which array constitutes the full semantic domain of this verb.

Ethos and Merit Compensation:

Up to 1960, the guild orientation of those involved in higher education was quite strong. And though business methods of

accounting, formula budgeting, tuition pricing and salary schedules were well entrenched, the dominant ethos that motivated and guided academic administration was that of the guild of scholars. Academic freedom, tenure, peer review, curricular decision-making, admission criteria, and academic standards were total guild responsibilities. These responsibilities were executed through faculty units, e.g., departments, programs, institutes, committees, and senates. Recommendations were made to the board of trustees and their administrators. And though legal control had always resided in the corporation of the university or college, the recommendations by and large were accepted. There is no need to recite a litany of historical details that would account for the current ethos of university and college administrators and their faculties. But the change since 1960 is profound.

Given the developments of institutional research in American higher education over the last quarter century, university and college boards of trustees and their administrators have better empirical handles on the economics and the quality of education going on in their institutions. [4] Today's real-time interactive data bases, faculty/client evaluations, operations research techniques and multivariate analyses are intellectual tools for data reduction and their conceptualization into organizational intelligence or feedback. [5]

Hand-in-hand with these developments, economic stringency and faculty unrest have come, the latter often leading to faculty unionization. The bucolic splendor of college and university campus life has been rent into competing economic factions,

defined under unionization as the adversarial relations between "management" and "labor." A business ethos has supplanted the value orientation of the scholar. Higher education is said to be an "industry." Colleges and universities have "client markets." Programs and curricula make "contributions to margin." Students and faculty are "managed." And tenure is severed from academic freedom because "tenure is solely an economic issue."

Given their business orientation, how do higher education administrators construe the term "merit" in "merit compensation"? This can best be described in the following Symbolic Proposition No. 1:

$$M = f \vee (A \vee B \vee C). \qquad [1]$$

Symbolic Proposition No. 1 reads: Given the business ethos of college and university administrators they construe the verb "to merit" to mean either "to earn" [A], or "to deserve" [B], or "to value or give preference" [C]. Therefore merit compensation is construed to be whatever a faculty salary schedule reads [A]. Or, it is construed to be the "deserts" found in the perquisites of status including salary [B]. Or, it is construed to be some extraordinary prize purse awarded for excellence in teaching or research, thus analogous to the "bonus" in business [C].

Faculties, however, have not given up their guild orientation. Even when faculty unions bargain today, the notion of merit compensation is construed differently. This is best described in Symbolic Proposition No. 2:

$$M = f \vee (A \cap B \cap C). \qquad [2]$$

Symbolic Proposition No. 2 reads: Given the higher education

ethos of the faculty guild, the faculty construes the verb "to merit" to mean "to earn deservedly that which is valued" [$\underline{A} \cap \underline{B} \cap \underline{C}$]. Thus merit compensation for the faculty is not merely salary [$\underline{A}$], nor perquisites office [$\underline{B}$], nor the extraordinary prize purse for teaching or research or some bonus [$\underline{C}$]. Rather, merit compensation is understood to be a deserved earning which reflects esteem [$\underline{A} \cap \underline{B} \cap \underline{C}$].

There is little doubt that the two definitional orientations are within the semantic domain of the verb "to merit." And it also true that the status perspectives of higher education administrators and the faculty orient each toward a specific semantic component pattern of the verb "to merit." This metatheoretical analysis perhaps suggests that higher education management teams and faculty groups (whether unionized or not) may be talking "past" each other. To rent a collegial institution that has shared values into competing factions is a tragedy. Nevertheless, among people of goodwill, any organizational structure can and does work.

What is needed is a valuational calculus for <u>collectively</u> evaluating administrative and instructional service. Of course, such a calculus must singularly reflect the institutional goals of the college or university. Imagine the moral suasion stemming from the results of a study that related the college or university audit to the achievement of specific institutional goals! Such an holistic institutional evaluation would set organizational brackets around the meaning of "merit compensation." And given the development of real-time interactive data bases coming on-line,

this writer believes that the concept of merit will be developed into better operational meanings, given some assumed scale of values or preferences. But the challenge is for the higher education community on any campus to develop a common axiological language and a shared hierarchy of values intrinsic to the common self-interest of their whole enterprise. [6]

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F O O T N O T E S

[1] James Steve Counelis, "Junior College Salary Structure Depends Upon Assumptions," College and University Business (October 1964).

[2] For the methodology of semantic componential analysis, see 1979 unpublished AESA paper: James Steve Counelis, "Equity, Competence and Human Capital Investment."

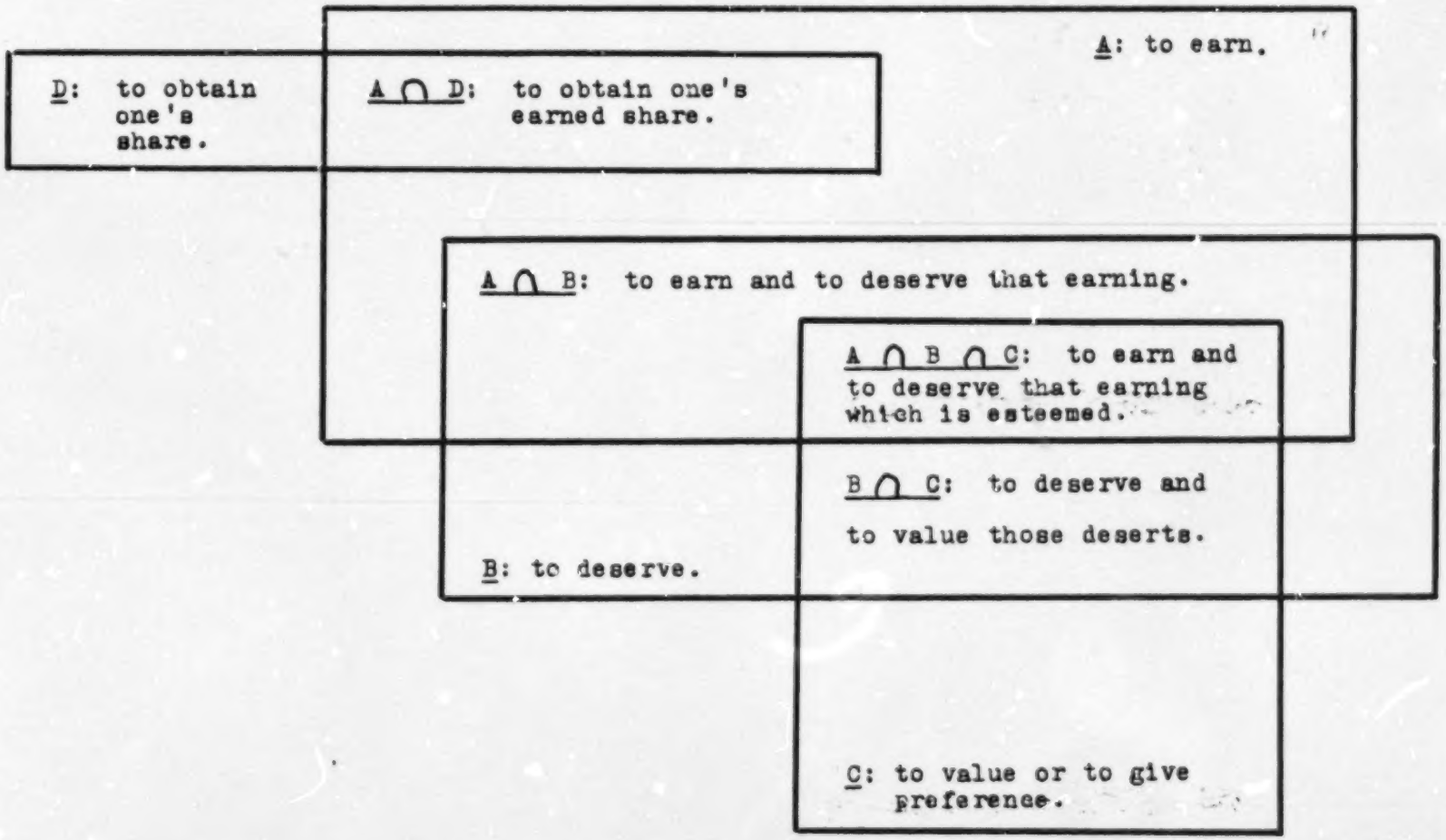
[3] The Oxford English Dictionary, (1933), Vol. VI, s.v. "merit."

[4] For an excellent survey of current institutional research methods and issues, see: Paul Jedamus et al., Improving Academic Management (San Francisco, Ca.: Jossey-Bass, 1980). For a number of years, the Association for Institutional Research has been publishing its journal, Research in Higher Education and the annual Forum papers.

[5] For the concepts of cybernetic feedback and organizational intelligence, see: James Steve Counelis, "The Open Systems University," in J. Rose and C. Bilciu (eds.), Modern Trends in Cybernetics and Systems: Proceedings of the Third International Congress of Cybernetics and Systems, Bucharest, Romania, August 25-29, 1975 (Berlin: Springer-Verlag, 1977), Vol. I, pp. 153-169.

[6] For ideas on the relation of facts to values, see: (1) Abraham Edel, Science and the Structure of Ethics in the International Encyclopedia of Unified Science (Chicago, Il: The University of Chicago Press, 1961), Vol. II, No. 3; (2) David C. Paris and James F. Reynolds, The Logic of Policy Inquiry (New York, NY: Longmans, Inc., 1983).

THE SEMANTIC DOMAIN OF THE VERB "TO MERIT"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